

THE LOADED LANGUAGE OF COLUMNS

Nick Walker | January 2025



Sticks and Stones, an intervention, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin

photograph taken 2014

On a recent visit to Hill House in Helensburgh, by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, a quote which formed part of the exhibition, struck a chord. 'How absurd it is to see modern buildings make imitation of Greek temples! We must clothe modern ideas in modern dress' wrote Mackintosh in 1893.

What is it about columns?

Why do we associate them with power, governance and influence?

Why would you want historically irrelevant columns stuck onto the front of your 1980's home on a suburban housing estate?

Stylistically, why have we, and why do some still draw so heavily on a specific language of columns from civilisations that reached their zeniths and ended so long ago?

The simplest form of column can be found in nature itself: the trunk of a tree. The trunk allows branches to reach up to the sun, supports the leaves to enable photosynthesis, and transfers the load back to the ground, supported by a root system below as foundations that are usually the size of the canopy of the tree above. Neat and natural form and function.

A great meeting of the trunk of trees and the ultimate reduction of architecture to the power of structural columns took place at an exhibition in 2014 at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. In advance of the closure of Mies Van der Rohe's masterpiece for retrofit and refurbishment by David Chipperfield Architects, the architects themselves installed an installation entitled 'sticks and stones.' The intervention reflected on the rich cultural history of the column in architecture, with the name of the exhibition, pointing to two elements of the Neue Nationalgalerie and architecture in general, namely columns and plinths. Giving the illusion of returning to the construction phase, each of the hundred and forty four, 8 metre tall, spruce tree trunks, symbolically supported the weight of the 'floating' roof.

David Chipperfield himself could be described as a new classicist, someone who is interested in the forms of the past, albeit expressed with a contemporary aesthetic, pared down and free of superfluous decoration. David Chipperfield's architecture often employs the use of pared down columns to denote a sense of the civic. This is demonstrated in such projects as the James-Simon-Galerie, Museum Island, Berlin; The Gallery of Modern Literature in Marbach Am Neckar, Germany; or the cast columns at One Pancras Square, Kings Cross, London. The columns of One Pancras Square hint at a more playful architecture from the practice, with a surface pattern of woven straps, columns drawing on the site's industrial past, and apparently referencing Gottfried Semper's theory relating to the role of weaving in the development of man-made structures.

Surrounded as we are by the somewhat anodyne clean lines and simple forms that are currently 'en vogue' in our cities, which eschew colour and decoration in favour of form, with a preference for a pared-back, unobtrusive aesthetic, the playful, whimsical architecture of the recent past is finding new audiences, including myself.

Modernists, brutalists and more recently postmodernists have all employed columns. However, postmodern architects have unashamedly referenced the past and have not steered clear of employing pattern and colour by the shed load.

The architecture of John Outram personifies this change in the opinion of the establishment. As a student I can clearly remember the fuss that accompanied the unveiling of the Isle of Dogs Water Pumping Station, in 1988, in London. One of three pumping stations, the other two undertaken by Richard Rogers and Nicholas Grimshaw, this station certainly caught the headlines and not always for good reason. At the time it was thought to be gaudy and Outram's pluralistic approach to architecture made him an outsider, with his work once described as 'architectural terrorism.'

Described by Outram himself as 'The Temple of Storms', the building features a pair of grandiose over scaled columns on its front elevation, and was given Grade II* listing in 2017. With the passing of time, Outram's pumping station has more recently been described as a 'highly creative reworking of a familiar formal language, executed with masterful handling of colour, pattern, scale and detail'. Even his reworking and extension of the former Addenbrooke's Hospital, built in the 18th century, to become the Cambridge Judge Business School (iv) has gained new respect. At the time of its completion in 1995 it was universally

from top to bottom: Storm Water Pumping Station, Isle of Dogs, John Outram | M2 Tokyo, Kengo Kuma | Homebase, Kensington, London, Ian Pollard
images sourced by the author



lambasted by the architectural press for being pastiche, but even more abhorrently for having supposedly structural columns which were far from such, but instead functioned as service risers for building systems and IT cabling! Another building more revered with the passing of time, as has much of Outram's work. In fact, Sphinx Hill house, Moulsoford, Oxfordshire, completed in 1999, and with more than a nod to ancient Egypt (including decorated columns) was as of June 2024, the 'youngest' listed building in the UK, achieving Grade II listed status.

Kengo Kuma's extraordinary oeuvre of 1991, the M2 building, was built as a showroom for Mazda. A jumble sale of classical references, topped off with an enormous singular Ionic column (which houses the lift). 'I want to be a Piranesi for the electronic age' said Kuma at the time of its completion. In a Dezeen article from 2017, Kuma stated 'To be honest, sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed by some of my buildings. I studied the history of architecture and discovered that the basis for the European and American architecture tradition was in fact Ancient Greek and Roman architecture.' No doubt the M2 building is one of his embarrassments!

Not all Postmodern architecture that employed the use of historically loaded columns have survived. Two buildings I remember vividly from my youth were by the same architect/developer, Ian Pollard, who later packed it all in to focus on naked gardening. Sainsbury's DIY superstore, Homebase, located in Kensington, London, was completed in 1988. The Ancient Egyptian-style design of this store was researched by Pollard and his stone carver, Richard Kindersley during visits to London's British Museum and Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, as well as in consultation with Egyptian experts. The decorative capitals of the columns running along the façade were typical of Ancient Egyptian temples. A limestone frieze of ten Ancient Egyptian deities decorated the façade overlooking the car park to the left of the entrance. The Architect's Journal featured an article entitled 'Pollarding architecture' at the time, describing the Homebase as a 'profoundly depressing little structure' and noting that it was 'sad to see the current revival in decoration in architecture is already producing such debased and bankrupt pastiches.' The AJ described Pollard's buildings as 'advertising not architecture.' Pollard's other masterpiece Marco Polo House, completed in 1989, for British Satellite Broadcasting, with its crystallised glass ceramic columns and broken classical pediment, has also been demolished.

Ebay "Door Column Decorative Front Door Fluted Columns Pillars White Fibreglass", 2025

So where does this leave us?

Columns transfer whatever weight is located above back to the ground.

Columns help provide stability to buildings by resisting vertical and lateral forces.

Columns also allow for apertures and openings in walls, and can serve a decorative purpose, enhancing the appearance of a building.

Columns can be structural, functional, or decorative, but are often simply a way of holding things up. Layers of history and civilisation influence the architecture of the long since in the past, the recent past, the present and no doubt the future. The 1980's suburban housing estate replete with doric and ionic applied porches may not be currently fashionable with those who know best (or at least think they do). That being said, should you wish to purchase your own front door adornments, look no further than ebay to buy 'Door Column Decorative Front Door Columns Pillars White Fibreglass' for less than £400!

The screenshot shows an eBay product listing. At the top is the eBay logo and a search bar. Below the search bar is a breadcrumb trail: < Back to home page > Home Garden > ... > DIY Materials > Doors & Door Hardware > Other Door Hardware. The main product image shows a white fluted column installed on a brick house. To the left of the main image is a vertical strip of smaller images showing different views and related products. Above the main image is a red banner that says '34 VIEWED IN THE LAST 24 HOURS'. To the right of the main image are icons for sharing and a heart icon with the number '133'. Below the main image is a large blue button that says 'Buy it now'. To the right of the main image is a sidebar with the product title 'Door Column Pillar Decorative Front Door Fluted Columns Pillars White Fibreglass', the seller's name 'Midland GRP Door Canopy (664) Business', the seller's rating '100% positive', and the price '£384.46'. Below the price is a note 'From £18.14 per month for 24 months with PayPal Credit*'. There are also buttons for 'Add to basket' and 'Watch this item'.